The Johnson Metal Co. Ltd.

The story of a family business which this month celebrates 50 years of active agency in the wire and welding industries.

Johnson Metal Company was incorporated on 5 February, 1924, to purchase the business previously carried on by Mr Harold Johnson. Mr Johnson, who was a member of the well known Johnson family involved in the manufacture of steel wire in the Manchester area, was himself a textile man, and it was during one of his visits to Germany that he made the aquaintance of a gentleman named Nacken, who was then running the firm of Kratos at Gruna, Leipzig. For some reason, Mr Johnson returned to England with the agency for Kratos wire drawing machines in the United Kingdom and America although apart from his family connections, he knew nothing of wire. He was however acquainted with an engineer named John S Waters, and persuaded the latter to join him, thus forming the Johnson Metal Company. It is interesting that on the same date, the Greenwich Mean Time "Pips" were introduced; these could be heard on radios which were then being manufactured in Switzerland by a certain Mr Schlatter; the price of copper wire bars reached £66.5.0. and tin rose some 70 - to be quoted at £257.2.6; the world was mourning the death of ex-President Wilson; Mr Ghandi was released from prison, and dockers were threatening strike action over a claimed increase of 2/- a day.

In 1926, the agency for the sale of diamond and Elmarid dies in the United Kingdom and all British Dependencies except Canada was received from the firm of Vereinigte Ziehsteinfabriken Urbanek Diener & Krause, and this agency, though now limited to the United Kingdom, is still held today.

The Kratos wire drawing equipment, with several dies incorporated in one machine was, at the time, of very advanced design, and presented a substantial departure from the hitherto unchallenged single hole wortle plate technique. But the speeds were high—some 4000 ft/min for copper and 1500 ft/min for ferrous wires, and slowly the English market came to realize the value of the new machinery available.

In the late 1920's, Mr Schlatter was concentrating not so much on radios as with the joining of wires together by resistance welding; this was due to the sudden demand for such a process resulting from the high speeds then being achieved in wire drawing. He saw as his best entry into the market the same firms who were dealing with the wire drawing machines themselves, and made agreements with several of them such as Suermondt & Dumont, Paris, C Rondorf, Stockholm, Ernst Gruener, Vienna, and the Johnson Metal Company, Manchester, the last one in 1932; in a very short time success was achieved with the "S" and "E" models, and the early records show Rylands Bros Warrington having 27, and British Ropes Ltd Retford, some 13. It is worthy of comment that the design of these machines was not only advanced for the time, but was so basic that the identical machines are still being purchased by the trade today.

Additional agency agreements were made with Wetzel & Schlosshauer of Heidelberg, manufacturers of lubricating equipment, and Tools and Drawing Dies Ltd for the sale of their hard metal drawing dies.

J H Waters
managing director

By 1935, the company was clearly well established in the wire trade, incidentally trading in the finished product as well as in machinery; but all was not plain sailing since naturally enough, competition was increasing particularly in the steel industry.

The detailed accounts records for the years are unfortunately unavailable, although a full set of shareholders accounts for the whole of the companys existence is preserved. For a new company, the turnover of the first 20 months at £7251 showing a loss of £1021 was not by any means unsatisfactory; by 1931 the figures had reached £30885 and a profit of £2690 was recorded—which no doubt prompted the minute that "after carefully studying the previous six months' work and future prospects the board had decided that more intensive visiting must be carried out and they had decided to authorise the expenditure of a sum not exceeding £400 to cover the purchase of a motor car . . . " The accounts show the cost at £445.12.6. Through to 1935 the company continued to have varying results, generally profitable, to the extent that a sum of £2000 was appropriated to "Reserve for Contingencies Account"; a further £2000 was added in 1936, and these amounts have remained untouched ever since. Stocks were held almost from the start, the figure of £196.12.7 showing in the 1926 accounts, and increased

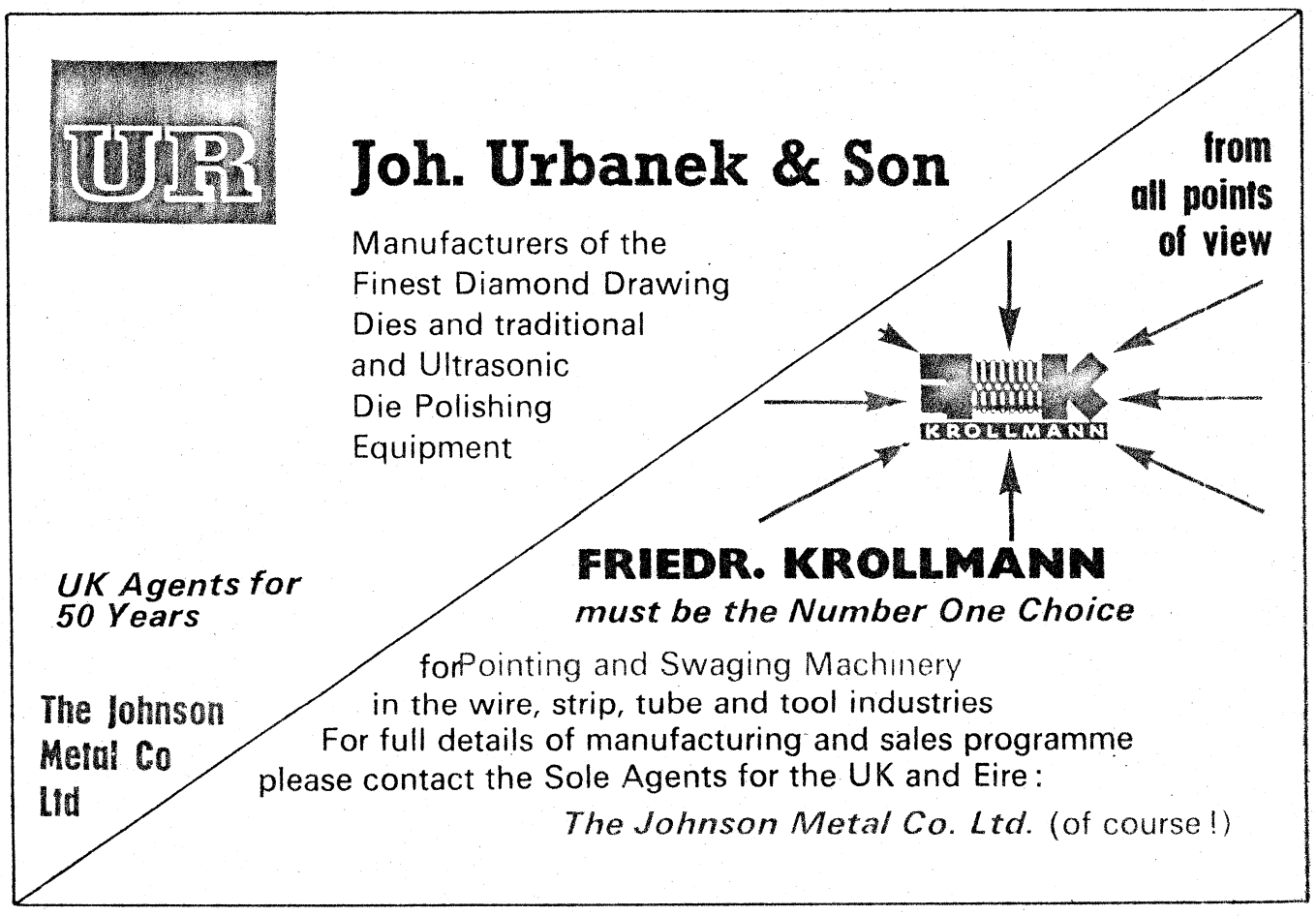
to £1584 by 1934; the 1973 accounts show over £36000.

The detailed books for 1935 make interesting reading. Frederick Smith & Co purchased a Schlatter J10 welder for £210; Harding, Rhodes & Co a Kratos EA 1V 9 holer with 3-speed gear box and 12 in finishing block for £560, and Joseph Sykes spent the considerable sum of £1,240 on a Kratos EA 1-6 6 holer. Just one folio from the ledger contains the customer list of D Morgan Rees, Hadfields Ltd, Bryce Ltd, D Bridge & Co, W T Glover & Co, T Holdsworth & Sons, British Ropes Ltd, Mr Mead, Richard Johnson & Nephew (a credit note, just by chance), Callenders Cable Co, and Dunlop Rubber Co - many of whom are still customers under one name or another today. Another entry which makes one perhaps yearn for the past reads: Wetzel & Schlosshauer—Appreciation in sterling as per statement . . . £1.10.0. And so the business continued, with competition increasing all the time. The competition came from the home front as well as abroad; one certain gentleman spent a long period at the Kratos works with J S Waters, ostensibly learning about the machinery for his firm and shortly afterwards, a British company commenced the manufacture of wire drawing machines. Another company in the north of England made a machine so similar to the Kratos model HSK that the castings even carried the same pattern number. At least the plagiarists of today are more sophisticated—just. The welding side continued to expand, with the smiling face of Eugen Robé (today the longest serving employee with the Schlatter firm) becoming well known to customers up and down the country.

During the war years, Johnson Metal Company manufactured the Kratos range, and the Urbanek range of die polishing machines under licence, and arranged for the manufacture of the Schlatter E and S butt welders by two Yorkshire firms. Obviously, manufacturing was difficult, the company being able to employ only five fitters, and machines were produced only in single or double series. Mr Waters was appointed by the war-time government as diamond die controller for the United Kingdom his counterpart in Germany being ironically enough his friend Mr Urbanek!

Post war development

Having survived the war, the company suffered a set-back when Harold Johnson died in August 1946. However, now released from the Army after a distinguished career, John H Waters was persuaded by his father to join the firm as "manager", a term which embraced virtually all aspects of the firm's business, and the company set about restoring its position. But, in May 1950, the death of Mr John S Waters removed the other direct link with the pre-war organisation, and J H Waters had to set about the task anew. At the time, Walter Nacken was still building Kratos machines in W Berlin, having fled penniless to the western sector in 1945. Johnson Metal Company were still selling a few machines, although they had had to call upon Barron & Crowther, then run by the Martinez brothers, to manufacture some 17 Kratos Lv1 machines capable of taking a 30 lb spool instead of the pre-war standard of 6 lb for Connollys. In the late 1940's, two brothers Niehoff married two daughters Bauer, Mr Bauer himself also being involved in the manufacture of wire drawing machinery. Walter Nacken, who had got into considerable financial difficulties, was persuaded to join them and, in a short time, the firm of Maschinenfabrik Niehoff was established from this combination. J H Waters was invited to Paris by Walter Nacken, there



S Wagstaff

met Herbert Niehoff, struck up an instant friendship, and returned with the Niehoff agency for the UK and Ireland. Success came rather more quickly than had been anticipated, the major factor being the superiority of Niehoff against their competitors in the technique of spooling. The SO 50 spooler, capable of taking a 100 lb spool, driven by a separate dc drive was probably the real reason for the start of the Niehoff success story.

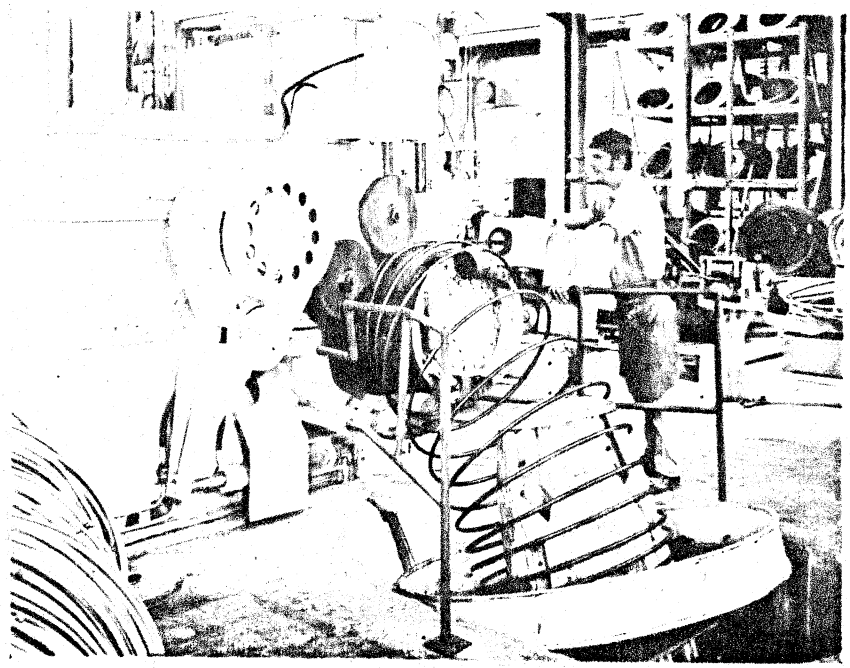
During the very early years of the association with Niehoff, the Schlatter welding side of the business was also reviving. The now famous M welder had been introduced in 1948, and the range was rapidly expanding to incorporate flash-butt welders, wire mesh welders and more sophisticated spot and projection welders. In the early 1950's the works manager of Sheffield Smelting Co Ltd, needed a 5-head Urbanek die polishing machine, but on discussing the unit with Mr Waters, had to compromise on a double-head machine, to which the remaining heads could be added when funds permitted. Not very long afterwards the same works manager wrote to Mr Waters suggesting that the latter might employ him as a personal assistant. In early 1953, Eric Wagstaff gentleman farmer —joined the firm, and shortly afterwards assumed responsibility for the sale of Niehoff equipment, Mr Waters then concentrating on the Schlatter range.

Machines were sold, slowly at first, with the occasional medium machine and rather more intermediate machines to such firms as Connollys, F D Sims and A C Scott. Then, with a rush, BICC placed an order for 46 M15 machines, AEI for 16 354 machines, and the flood gates were open. Spencer Wire purchased the first mesh welding machine from Schlatter in the country, Dimplex ordered radiator welding machines, and in a short space of time the comparative lull of the post war years had been shattered.

In the early 1960's the position of Johnson Metal Company as suppliers of high quality machinery was consolidated.

London Transport could find no better rail welder for construction of the Victoria Line than that produced by Schlatter; the domestic central heating boom started, with companies such as International Janitor & Hull Steel Radiators specifying Schlatter welding equipment for their radiator manufacture; the newly developed contact welder found a ready market at firms such as G E C, Pre-Met and Ward & Goldstone. On the wire drawing front, the first rod machine from Niehoff was installed at Derby Cables, followed by further units at AEI, BICC and Pirelli; further machines were supplied to almost all cable producers in the United Kingdom, not forgetting Unidare in Eire. Niehoff had, by this time, produced the world's first successful double spooler for continuous production from rod breakdown machines, and although competition was felt to a point on the home front, Johnson Metal Co managed to retain a very favourable share of the market.

The acceptance of drawing cones manufactured from ceramic prompted the inclusion of one of the world leaders in the field, Feldmuhle AG, into the Johnson Metal Co range. The patented steel-ceramic construction was quickly taken up by machinery manufacturers in Germany and Italy, and Johnson Metal Co can now offer drawing cones of either solid ceramic or the steel/ceramic combination for all makes of drawing machines for non-ferrous wires with an inlet size of up to 3.6 mm.



A Herborn HG250 in operation at BSC's Special Steels Division Stocksbridge

Growth

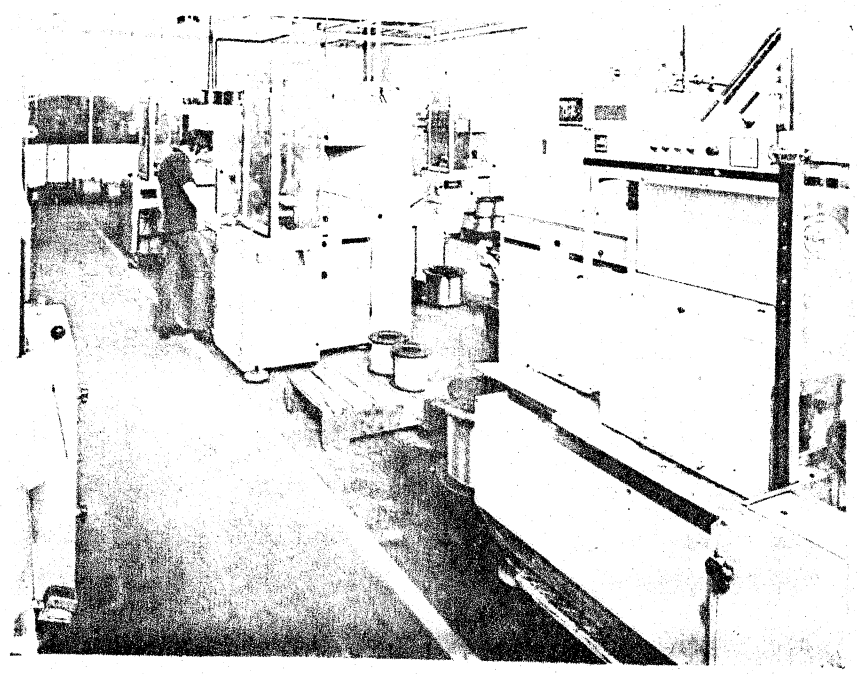
Over the last ten years, the firm has shown considerable growth—in turnover, staff and problems. The problems have basically all been directly connected with the position of sterling in relation to the D Mark and the Swiss Franc.

But, either by hook or with the co-operation of all parties concerned, temporary charge on imports, import surcharge, devaluations, revaluations, and floatings of all currencies have been to a greater, or lesser, extent overcome. In 1965, in the middle of a sterling crisis, the company decided to employ a chartered accountant as company secretary, despite the inborn mistrust by most engineers of such a breed; but R A Breton was not so much of a book-worm, and today is well known by many customers as price and terms negotiator. Perhaps his three years at Manchester University ostensibly reading for BA (Com), but really playing rugby, cards and traditional jazz allowed him to remain human, despite his subsequent professional training. Another "new venture" was the employment of sales representatives on a regional basis; one such, Tony Osman, specialised in the Schlatter side for many years after leaving Pirelli and is now sales manager for one of the company's friendly rivals. As a direct result of the merger between Niehoff and Herborn, Johnson Metal acquired the agency for the latter company, and were fortunate to employ Terry Robinson who had wide technical sales experience to cover this new field; to this he has been able to add, most successfully, the Krollman range of pointers and swagers, for whom Johnson Metal are now the sole UK agents. The expansion on the steel side of the business has been most encouraging to Johnson Metal, especially in view of the severe competition, both old and new, which even in recent times has been known to offer a replica of Johnsons own range at not quite the same cost. The Schlatter-orientated field sales force now comprises Reg Carter, David Bowman and John Kellaway, who together form a very successful team. Each in his own way is a completely different character, but there are very few prospective customers in their respective sales areas who are not well acquainted with the Schlatter range.

R A Breton

In 1968 the firm, with some 6000 sq ft at its disposal, decided to hold an exhibition of Schlatter contact welders in Manchester. The response was quite astonishing, proving that the personal contact which the representatives had established was indeed real; the experiment has successfully, been repeated twice, with hot staking and flash butt welding machines also included. Last year, an exhibition of the Schlatter range of flash butt welders and Selecta machines was held at the MEB showrooms in Birmingham, and this again proved most useful. These exhibitions together with the Olympia shows, have shown to the people that really matter the quality of the products being marketed. The 1970 Wire Exhibition at Olympia was perhaps the finest example of the Johnson Metal Co sales effort; without doubt their two adjoining stands were the centrepiece of the whole show, so much so that all the European agents gathered there with their customers, and both Niehoff and Schlatter were really given the first class treatment their products deserved.

Back at the head office, where the managing director is at his desk daily before 8.30, the team work is particularly evident; when panic breaks out over a customer requiring a spare part immediately, (which usually happens on a Friday afternoon), it would not be a surprise to anybody to find the accounts staff helping out in the stores. One note of sadness, however, must be recorded in the sudden death of Bill Wilbraham last November. Bill had been employed in the spares department for some 25 years, and his loss will be deeply felt both by the firm, and those many customers who knew him, or his voice, so well. One intrinsic difference between Johnson Metal Co and most other agencies is indeed in their spares service. Naturally enough, the chances are that the part required by a customer is not in stock, but the Company has always

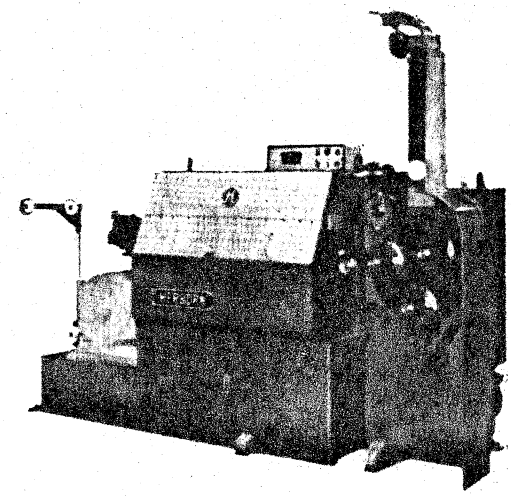


The latest M5 fine wire drawing machines recently installed at Connolly's (Blackley) Ltd

MASCHINENFABRIK HERBORN KG.

HIGH QUALITY MACHINERY OF ORIGINAL DESIGN FOR THE STEEL WIRE INDUSTRY

BULL BLOCKS
DOUBLE CAPSTAN MACHINES
STRAIGHTENING MACHINES
MEDIUM AND FINE WET DRAWING UNITS
SINGLE, DOUBLE AND TRIPLE SPOOLERS
COILING UNITS ETC. ETC.



HT 12 + Triple Spooler

U.K. Agents
The Johnson Metal Co. Ltd.
18, Sharp Street, Manchester, M4 4BU
Tel: 061 832 5594.

adopted a realistic policy and has currently some £40000 worth of spares at Sharp Street, which does in fact enable them to provide their customers with a service that few manufacturers can match. In these days when shortages of raw materials are resulting in even the most elementary spares being on extended delivery, this policy is especially valuable.

Family atmosphere

The personal contact between the directors and the staff on the one hand and the customers on the other must also be the envy of many companies. J H Waters—Jack to most—is the most amenable of characters. Believing as he does in personal contact at whatever level, he has ensured that the firm has retained its "family" atmosphere during his period as chairman and managing director from 1950, particularly by his active involvement in all activities of the firm, and his interest in his staff's " extra mural " activities. He is in fact a very modest character, playing down his obvious success should anybody raise the subject. His life consists of Johnson Metal Co and Rugby Union Football—being the Hon Treasurer of the Lancashire County, who last year not only won the County Championship, but also returned a record profit.

Further expansion is afoot, the first step being the opening of a regional sales and service office in Woburn Sands (how do they pick such a beautiful spot?) The company has two resident Schlatter service and commissioning engineers, and it may be that the standard of service in all its aspects has played a substantial part in the successful growth of the company. The regular support of their principals, in the form of Sieg Schroder from Niehoff and Peter Klopfer from Schlatter, both of whom will take quick decisions and give straight answers, as well as giving substantial technical advice, has also proved very beneficial over the period. More recently, Herbert Panhuis of Herborn and Heinz Eichas from Feldmuhle have given Johnson Metal the same support, and without doubt the whole sales force, armed with such class machinery, is formidable opposition to any prospective competitor.

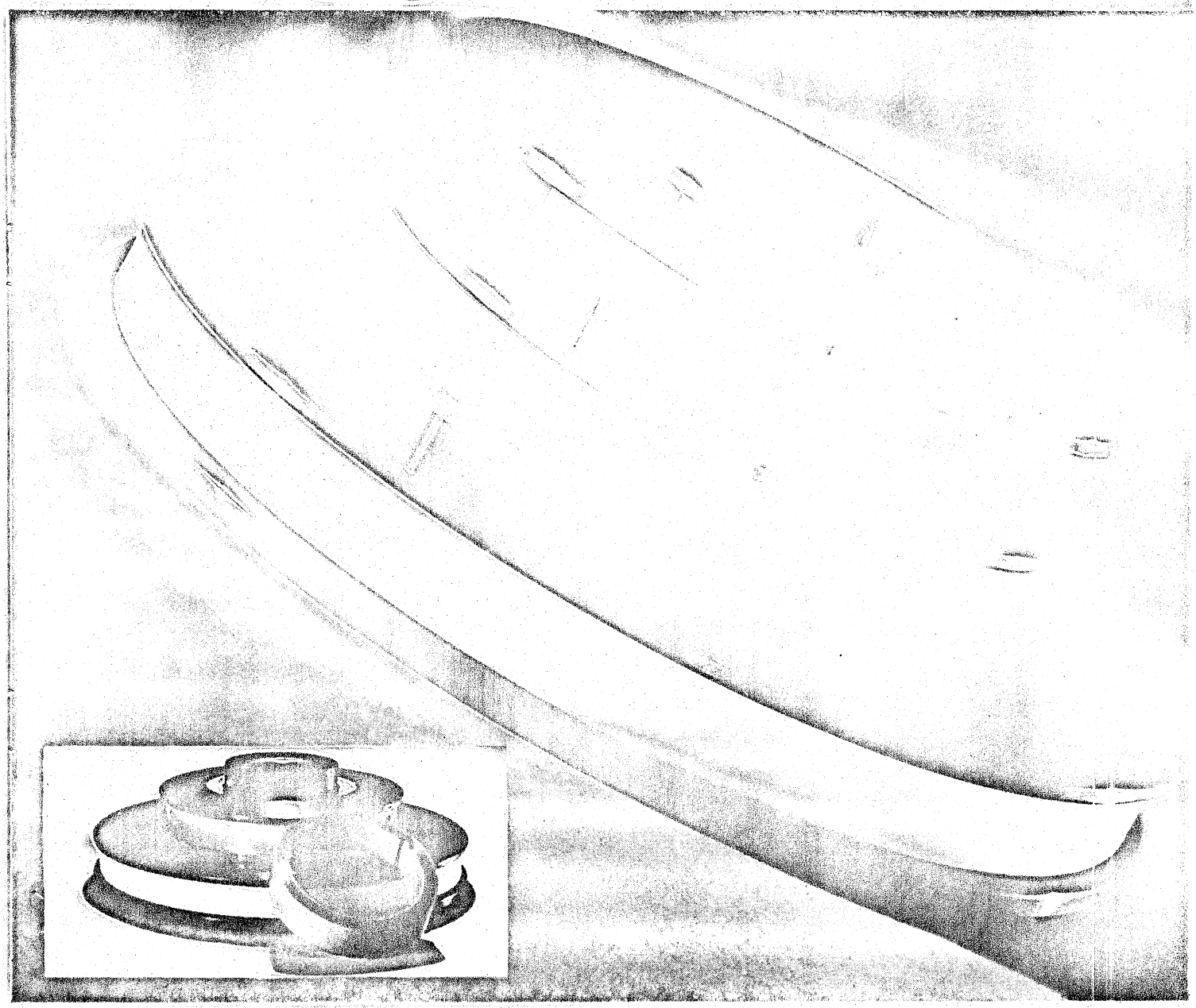
For some time, the Company has been considering diversification in keeping with the industries and the high quality of machinery with which it has been involved for such a long time. Negotiations have recently been held with the firm Sacma Limbiate of Milan, and the Company is pleased to announce that as from 1 January, 1974 they have been appointed sole agents in the UK and Eire for this manufacturer. The Sacma programme specialises in the cold heading machinery field, and has a very substantial reputation in Europe and also in the United States, where it is a serious competitor to the National range.

The future

What will the next 50 years bring? Doubtless Johnson Metal Company will experience problems, but as long as the team spirit which is so much a part of their business continues, so will they overcome these problems. The whole principle on which the firm operates, that of giving top class service, both in the simple meaning of the word, and in the fields of customer liaison and technical assistance, must mean that the company can only continue to be successful. Technological changes will no doubt continue at an ever increasing rate and, in order to remain in business, manufacturers, suppliers and customers will all have to move with the times; Johnson Metal are one of the few suppliers who give all the indications of being able to do just that.

FELDMÜHLE introduces the NEW CERAMIC ZT-35 cone

for intermediate to heavy
ferrous and non-ferrous wire drawing



Here's what production people, in plants now using this cone, say-

"We're presently using ZT-35 Cones to draw tire wire cord—with its 50% greater density, this ne material outlasts anything else available today."

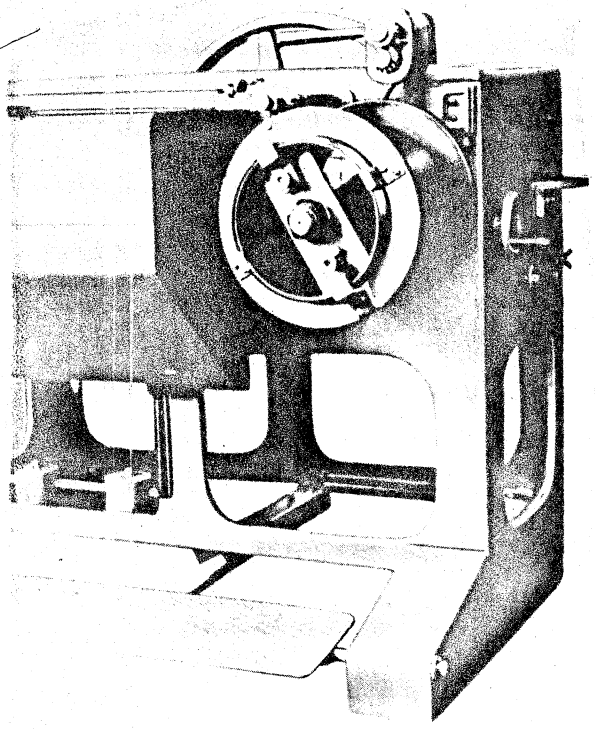
"We find we're getting a very **clean** wire surface, consequently we're enjoying greatly increase die life."

"Our experience shows that ZT-35 Cones have **and** hold an extremely high polish—makes stringing both faster and easier."

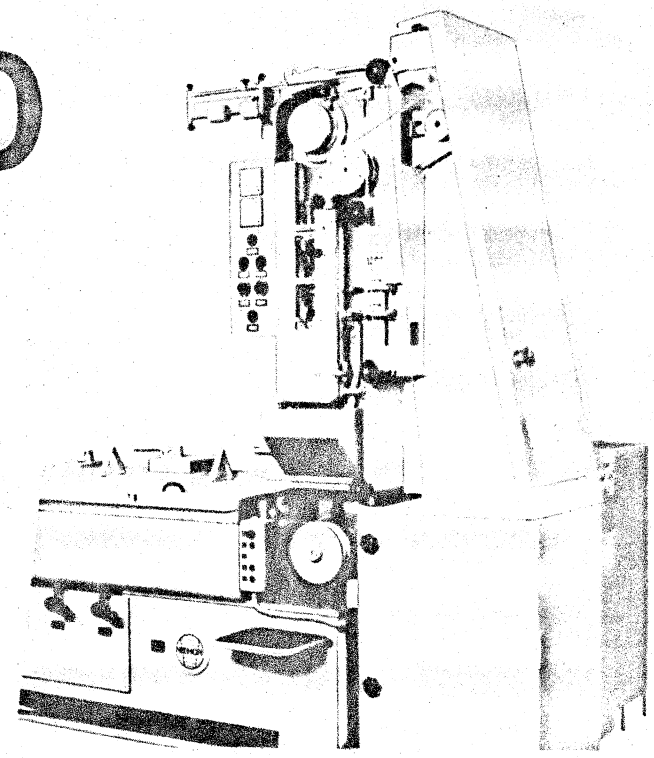
"Of course we don't change rings as often—when we do, it's a quick and simple operation."

Sole Agents for the United Kingdom & Eire

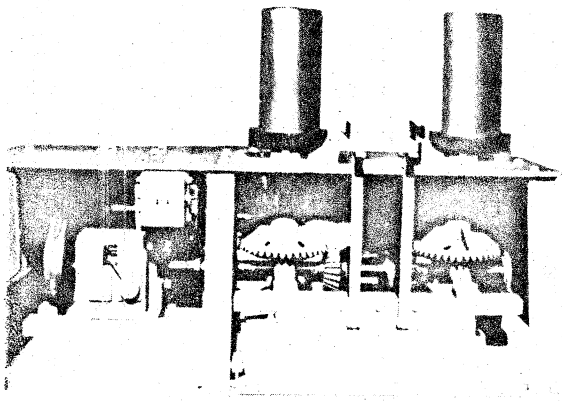
The Johnson Metal Co. Ltd. 18 Sharp Street Manchester M4 4BU Tel: 061 832 5594 Also at Apsley Hill Woburn Sands Bed



50 years



xperience in wire-drawing equipment



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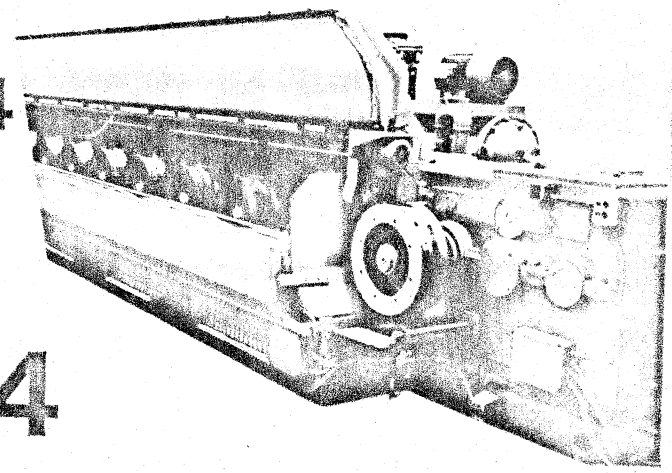
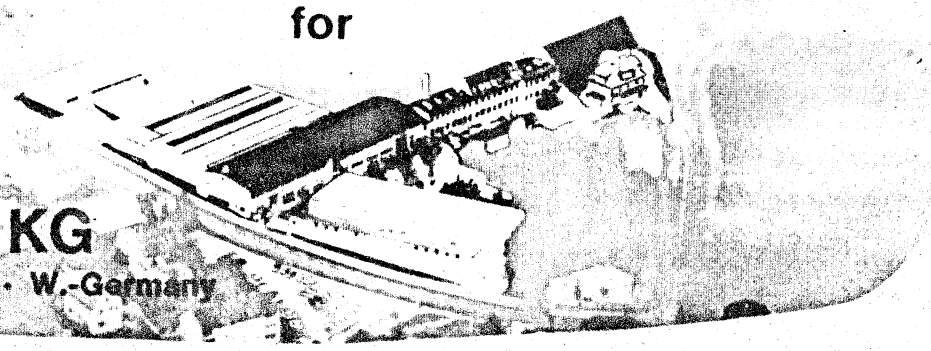


1974

The Johnson Metal Co Ltd

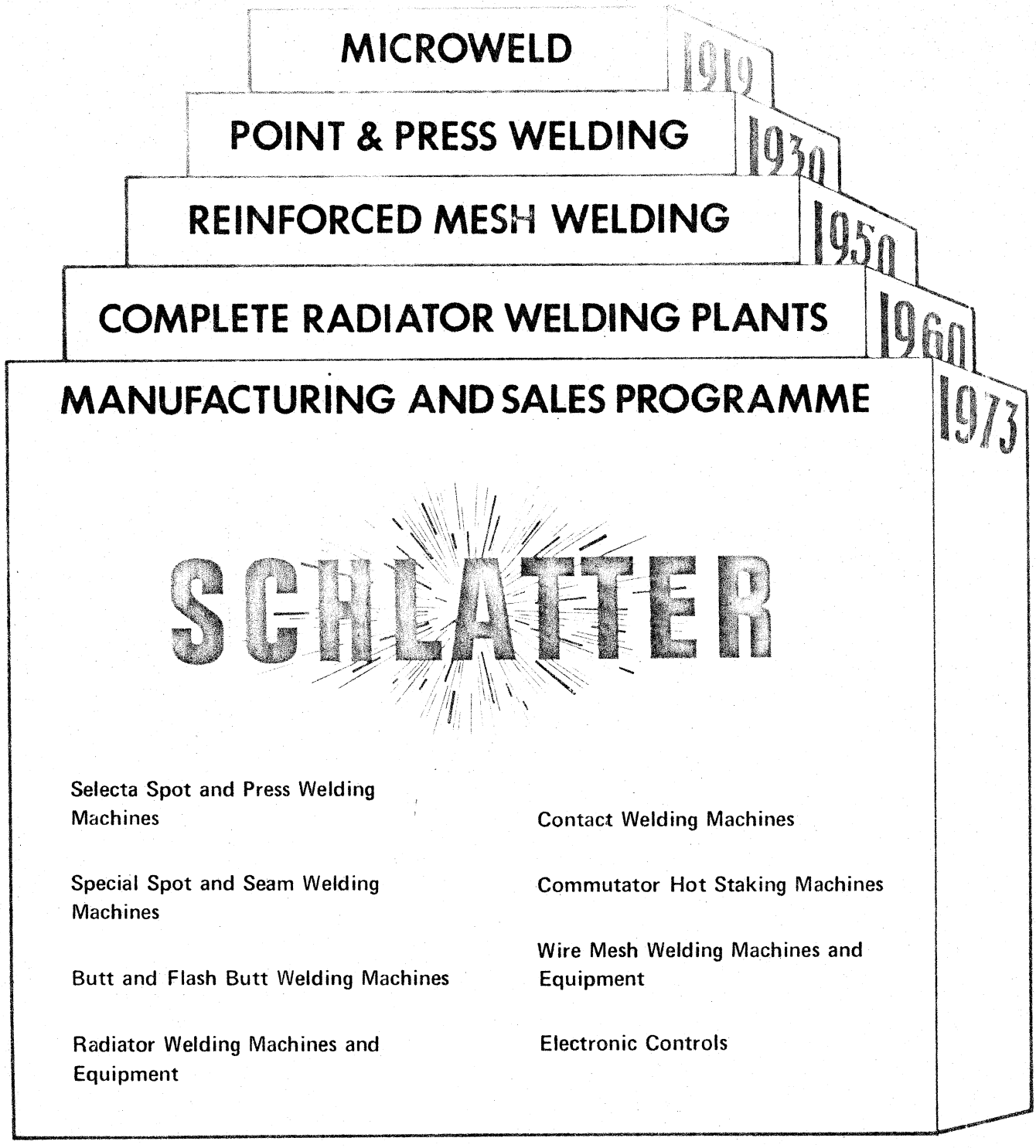
Sole representatives in the UK and Ireland for



NIEHOFF

NIEHOFF KG

8540 Schwabach · W.-Germany



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